

Labor, Left-Wing Populism, and Radical Reform: A Comparative History of The People Party (US) and Pakistan People's Party

Fawad Javaid¹,

Abstract

This paper studies the rise and decline of leftwing populism in Pakistan and the United States. It compares Pakistan People's Party and the People Party (United States) for this analysis. It highlights the common trends in the historical experience of the two parties in their respective eras and countries. It avers that leftist populist parties that shift to the center of the political spectrum, end up alienating the working class components of their support base. Alienation of the party base comes at a big political cost to such parties. Both, the People's Party (US) and the Pakistan People's Party witnessed declining fortunes because of the alienation of working class supporters.

Article History

Received 15 June 2026
Revised 25 June 2026
Accepted 24 July 2026
Published 30 July 2026
Corresponding Author*
OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Labor, Populism, Islamic Socialism, PPP, PP(US), Free Silver, Fusion, Monopoly,

Introduction

Labor and common people are the chief strengths of leftist parties. They provide most of the support a reformist or a revolutionary party requires. The base, the cadres and the rank and file support derived from working people and the common masses fuel and sustain revolutionary movements. Through the history of the modern nations, labor and grassroots have been the élan vital for insurgent populist movements working for leftist agendas.

Leftist-populist parties live and grow only as long as they maintain a vital connection with their base. The prospects of their survival and success are, in most cases, directly related to the level and nature of their connection with the working people and the multitudes. This fact has been true of the leftist-populist parties as far apart and distant as in the United States and, as this paper demonstrates, Pakistan. This research compares the history and politics of Pakistan People's Party and the People's Party (US) to argue that any leftist populism that loses the common, popular touch, and compromises its platform, degenerates and declines. It argues this case through evidence from the history of the rise and decline of two leftist-populist parties in Pakistan and the US respectively.

Pakistan People's Party is a fifty year-old Pakistani political party. It morphed from a center-left to a centrist party over the course of its fifty years' life. This mutation has affected the nature of the party's relationship with the masses in general and the working people in particular. It also witnessed a regression in the conduct and character of its leadership through the process of this transformation. This later change affected the party's political and electoral fortunes in a substantial way. The party witnessed a steady decline in its popularity graph with the centrist shift in its platform and the change in the character and quality of its leadership.

1. Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies & Political Science, Kohat University of Science & Technology. fawadjavaid@kust.edu.pk

The People's Party (US) lasted for a comparatively short duration i.e. from 1891 to the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. It did not hold power at the national level or win presidency in the United States. It, however, won governorships and successfully sent members to the Congress. The People's Party (US) Congressmen pushed many pro-common people legislations and forcefully clamored for an emancipatory agenda before receding in the annals of history. The causes of its decline are remarkably similar, at various levels, to the causes of the decline of the Pakistan People's Party. Loss of touch with the aspirations of the grassroots in general and the working people, in particular, remained an important reason for the decline of both People's Parties. The People's Party (US) made a strategic mistake of fusion with the Democratic Party of the US in the 1896 presidential election in that country. It was a step to the center of the political spectrum. Many elements of its original populist platform were set aside through the first few years of the twentieth century. Like its counterpart in Pakistan, the People's Party (US) alienated its base as it shifted to the center of the political spectrum. Its leaders back-pedaled on earlier progressive party positions and lost touch with the multitudes before it declined and passed away.

This research draws a comparative sketch of the rise and decline of the two People's Parties in two distant countries that were at different levels of economic, social and political development when they experienced their populist surges. The parallels in the experiences of the two populist parties at different points in the history of their respective countries, however, illustrate the common trends in the evolution of our collective human civilization. They demonstrate that across our cultural, regional and, historic removes and distances, we remain the same in our historical experiences.

A. The Pakistan People's Party (1967-2017): Rise, Decline and Degeneration of Left-Wing Populism in Pakistan

I. Origins

The Pakistan People's Party originated as a protest and a leftist insurgency against Pakistan's upper classes. Field Marshal Ayub Khan's government (1958-1969) was the first target of its radical activity. It was established on November 30, 1967 at the residence of Dr. Mubashir Hassan (1922) in Lahore. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was its first Chairman. Other leaders who founded the party were a mixed bag of Pakistani leftists, ranging, in ideological terms, from Communists such as Jalal-ud-Din Abdul Raheem (1905-1977) and Malik Meraj Khalid (1915-2003), Socialists like Meraj Muhammad Khan (1938-2016), to left leaning Muslim intellectuals like Hanif Ramay (1930-2006). Dr Mubashir Hassan and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto were more of Leftist-Populists rather than Socialists or Communists. They later came to emphasize 'Islamic Socialism' rather than pure Socialism or Communism as Pakistan People's Party credo.

Pakistan of the late 1960s was undergoing economic hardship which Pakistani leftists attributed to the failure of the much trumpeted, 'Decade of Development' of the General Ayub Khan's rule in the country. Ayub Khan's liberal economic policies premised on the 'Trickledown Theory of Development' of the 1960s had mired the country in an economic crisis after an initial boom. Socio-economic inequalities had risen with the concentration of the country's financial and industrial capital in fewer hands. Late in 1960s political economists noted that twenty-two families tied in business and familial alliances held most

of the country's banking, business and industrial assets.² Most of these families were directly connected with or related to key power holders in Ayub Khan's government. The charge of crony capitalism leading to an economic crisis was compellingly levelled against Ayub Khan's economic managers. US economic aid to Pakistan played a significant role in Ayub Khan's developmental agenda. That aid whittled down following the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war. In the absence of the aid money Ayub Khan's 'Decade of Development' came crashing down. To make matters worse, most of the benefits of the Ayub Khan regime's economic policies were reaped by the Western half of the country. People in the erstwhile East Pakistan felt deprived and alienated, leading to further polarization in the country. Labor unrest started in Pakistan's urban areas and soon grew in size and intensity.

Pakistan People's Party originated against the backdrop of the tensions spawned by such failing economic policies of the Ayub Khan government. It harnessed the labor unrest, then prevailing in the country, to wage a successful campaign of agitation against Ayub Khan's military government. Coercive use of force against anti-Ayub agitators further inflamed passions. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto blamed Ayub Khan for a sellout of Pakistan's interests in the Tashkent Pact of January 1966. This pact had brought the 1965 war to an end. Riding high on the tide of popularity for his role in anti-Ayub agitation, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his Pakistan People's Party were established as a national level political force by the time General Ayub Khan was forced to resign on March 25, 1969.

II. The Platform

Pakistan People's Party espoused a common people and working class centered platform at the time of its birth. It believed that the two could best be served by, what the party ideologues called, 'Islamic Socialism.' Islamic Socialism had emerged as a political philosophy among South Asian Muslim Scholars by the middle of the twentieth century. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto first used the term on November 23, 1966 at a Muslim Students Federation (MSF) meeting at the YMCA Hall, Lahore.³ In Pakistan the concept of Islamic Socialism was developed by a group of writers, professors and journalists gathering around the Magazine *Nusrat*. They included men like Hanif Ramay, Safdar Mir (Zeno) (1922-1998), and Maulana Ghulam Rasul Mehr (1893-1971). Far from being Marxist-Socialists, these men were left-leaning intellectuals and scholars. Maulana Ghulam Rasool Mehr was a religious scholar of high repute, venerated in India and Pakistan alike. These men wanted 'to develop Islamic Socialism as an intellectual movement that would enable Pakistan, fully in consonance with its religious foundations, to find a route to modernity between atheistic materialism on the left and wholesale westernization and religious obscurantism on the right.'⁴ Later, a religious scholar Maulana Kausar Niazi (1934-1994) became Minister of Religious and Minority Affairs in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's cabinet. The manifesto of the PPP, however, was written by J.A. Raheem, a communist. It, however, asserted the religious

² Murtaza Haider, "What they Never Tell Us about Ayub Khan's Regime," *Daily Dawn*, November 1, 2016.

³ Philip E. Jones, *The People's Party Rise to Power* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 101.

⁴ Jones, *The People's Party Rise to Power*, 101.

credentials of the party when it declared, “Islam is our Religion; Democracy is our Politics ; Socialism is our Economy; Power lies with the People.”⁵

Pakistan People’s Party followed this left-leaning populist platform through Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s time in office (1972-1977), the years of opposition against the military rule of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) and through the first government of Benazir Bhutto (1988-1990), Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s daughter and successor in politics. During this time Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was ousted from power and hanged by the right wing military government of General Zia-ul-Haq (1924-1988), the PPP faced severe government repression and waged a formidable resistance against the military rule of General Zia, and contested, and won, an election following the death of General Zia in 1988. The PPP agitated and struggled against the military government under the banner of the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) in alliance with a motley crowd of different Pakistani political parties. The PPP, however, retained its leftist-populist platform during this time. Benazir Bhutto, the first woman Prime Minister of Pakistan, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s daughter and successor, remained the leader of the PPP till her assassination in December 2007. During this time, she twice became the Prime Minister of the country i.e. (1988-1990) and (1993-1996). On both occasions she was dismissed from office on charges of corruption and mismanagement of government. She remained in exile for over a decade after the ouster of her second government.

During her second stint in power ‘Benazir clearly began to shift the PPP towards a more centrist platform, encouraging privatization but retaining the party’s populist demeanor.’⁶ This move to the center continued after the end of her second government in 1996 and through the years when the PPP remained in opposition to the center-right government of her successor Nawaz Sharif (1996-1999), and the military government of General Pervez Musharraf.

By the time the PPP leader arrived in Pakistan to contest election following a controversial deal with General Musharraf in 2007, Benazir Bhutto described PPP as a left-liberal outfit.⁷ The prefix of left, however, had lost meanings for the leaders of the PPP by this time. The PPP government that came to power after the death of Benazir in 2007 lasted from 2008 to 2013. Her widower remained the president of Pakistan during this time. This government used the PPP left platform to win elections but did not offer much to the masses or the working people in terms of public policies.

A poverty alleviation program styled ‘Benazir Income Support Programme’ was designed on a neo-liberal rather than a leftist model. Even this programme was tainted with large scale corruption charges during its management in the PPP government era. Through the era of the PPP government under president Zardari the party faced both, a crisis of capability and a dearth of will to deliver much to the common masses and its historic base of working people. This perfidy to the party platform proved to be expensive in political

⁵ Farooq Sulehria, “The Left in Pakistan: A Brief History,” *Links: International Journal of Socialist Revival*, August 8, 2009, <http://links.org.au/node/170> .

⁶ Nadeem Farooq Paracha, “49 Years of the PPP: A Visual Journey,” *Dawn*, December 1, 2016.

⁷ Paracha, “49 Years of the PPP: A Visual Journey.”

terms. The PPP lost elections at the national level in 2013. The base and the leadership of the party too changed during this time. While the party was discredited with the common masses, its leadership was caught in scandalous corruption charges. The gradual shift to the center and failure to deliver for its base led to the decline of Pakistan People's Party over a period of four and half decades.

III. The Base

The base of the Pakistan People's Party, at the time of its inception, contained people from a diverse array of social and economic backgrounds. The party slogan promised 'Roti, Kapra aur Makan' to its followers which translates to 'bread, clothing and a house.' These were, primarily, the essential concerns of the working people of the country at that time. The party platform mostly addressed the working people but students and the lower middle classes in urban areas too made up the party's base. Philip E. Jones notes that majority of the participants at the founding convention of the PPP were students and lawyers.⁸ Most of the early followers and supporters of the party came from urban areas and small cities.⁹ As the party evolved, it retained this base till the middle of the 1990s until the poor people started getting alienated with the centrist shift of the party and the adoption of certain neo-liberal policies by the second government of Benazir Bhutto. PPP won 2008 elections because of the rise of a wave of sympathy for the party following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. People voted for the PPP in the hope that the party leadership would have learnt lessons from its earlier mistakes and days in the wilderness and exile. This, however, proved to be a proverbial case of triumph of hope over experience. Any hopes for the redemption of party turned out to be futile.

The PPP government formed in 2008 lost popularity as groups of opportunistic business cronies of the Party Co-Chairman, and President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari were blamed for large scale corruption. By this time, the party displayed numerous signs of degeneration and decline. The leadership too witnessed regression as businessmen of shady backgrounds and questionable reputes supplanted the clean intellectuals and labor leaders of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Benazir's times. Voters refused to accept the new leaders of dubious reputes. The alienated base of the PPP registered their protest by voting out the PPP government in 2013 Elections. The party could survive in its bastion of Sind Province only. At the national level it polled just 14.7 % of the total votes polled, trailing behind the center-right parties of PML-N (32%) and PTI (16.2%).¹⁰ It remained the second largest party in the Senate of Pakistan only because the senators had been elected indirectly by an electoral college of parliamentarians from the 2008 parliament.

IV. The Decline

The decline of left-wing populism in Pakistan under the PPP banner was neither unwarranted nor unforeseen. Any political party that fails to deliver the goods for its base faces a decline in its political fortunes. The only time PPP fulfilled many of its promises to its supporters after coming into power was during its first stint in government under Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto.

⁸ Jones, *The People's Party Rise to Power*, 118.

⁹ Jones, *The People's Party Rise to Power*, 118.

¹⁰ "Pakistan Elections 2013 Total Voter Turn Out: 55%," *The Express Tribune*, May 21, 2013.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto introduced a workers- friendly labor policy in 1972. It offered security of service to workers, a gratuity rate of 20 days of last pay drawn for each year of workers' service on his retirement or termination from service. It also offered representation for workers in factory management committees.¹¹ A National Industrial Relations Commission headed by a retired judge of a superior court was setup to adjudicate labor relations in the country.¹² This bonhomie between the labor and PPP government, however, did not last long. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's Police fired at striking workers in Karachi in July and October 1972 killing and injuring many.¹³ Labor agitation continued during Bhutto government till 1975. In 1973, Meraj Muhammad Khan had a falling out with Bhutto and resigned the ministry of Labor.¹⁴ J.A. Rahim a left ideologue, and Minister of Law too had a falling out with Bhutto and was arrested, persecuted and ousted from the party (in 1975).¹⁵

Labor's relations with the PPP improved somewhat after the ouster and death of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and remained normal during the PPP's time in opposition during the 1980s. Pakistan's working people were still willing to support the PPP. Meraj Muhammad Khan rejoined the party during this time. When Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan in April 1986 after a two years' exile, she was welcomed by a huge crowd of supporters. During her first tenure as the Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir reigned in the party's leftist wing. She, however, realized that the bourgeoisie of Punjab, who supported the PPP in 1970s, had increasingly switched over to conservative parties like the Pakistan Muslim League. She had to rely on peasants and workers to maintain the electoral power of her party. She kept the party's populist rhetoric without its substance. The shift to center continued during her second tenure as the Prime Minister of Pakistan. She followed the neo-liberal programs of privatization and deregulation in the country.

In 1993 the PPP government set up a Labour Task Force under the leadership of a member of National Assembly, Abdul Aziz Memon, to recommend labor reforms in the country. The government, however, not only refused to accept the policy recommendations of its own task force, but also arrested its convener, Abdul Aziz Memon when he persisted in his demands for the implementation of his recommendations.¹⁶ This was the time of deteriorating relations between the PPP and the labor in its base. Benazir went into exile after the ouster of her government in 1996. The PPP supporters protested her ouster but their numbers had dwindled by this time. The cadres that had played a major role in the formation of the party had been sidelined by now. PPP had moved to the center of the political spectrum and the historic Jialas (Die-hard party supporters) did not find many reasons to sympathize with the PPP at this stage.

¹¹ Khursheed Ahmed, *Labour Movement in Pakistan: Past and Present* (Lahore: Institute of Workers Education and Labour Studies, 2009), 66.

¹² Ahmed, *Labour Movement in Pakistan: Past and Present*, 66.

¹³ Deneb Sumbul, "Labour Movement in Pakistan: Interview with Karamat Ali, Executive Director of the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research," *Alternatives International*, June 1, 2017, <http://www.alterinter.org/spip.php?article4591> .

¹⁴ Paracha, "49 Years of the PPP: A Visual Journey."

¹⁵ Paracha, "49 Years of the PPP: A Visual Journey."

¹⁶ Ahmed, *Labour Movement in Pakistan: Past and Present*, 54-55.

The PPP was routed in 1997 elections. Its vote bank of around 7.5 million in the past three elections dwindled to 4.1 million in 1997 elections.¹⁷ Benazir went into exile after the elections. Her husband was arrested over corruption allegations. The PPP stayed in opposition over the next decade. It only came second in the 2002 elections. It played a part in opposition to the military government of General Pervez Musharraf but then signed a pact with him under the National Reconciliation Ordinance of October 2007. This controversial ordinance gave amnesty to politicians, political workers and bureaucrats who were accused of corruption, money laundering, murders and terrorism between January 1, 1986 and October 12, 1999.¹⁸ This was a Mephistophelean bargain which was not going to endear PPP to its rank and file followers.¹⁹

The PPP won 2008 elections mostly because of a sympathy wave arising in Pakistan after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007. This government was discredited in record time. Today, Benazir's successor and party head in the position of the Co-Chairman of the party is a non-ideological pragmatist given to Machiavellian tactics that do not fascinate the rank and file of the party. Under him the PPP has lost whatever remnants of the left support it had by the first decade of the twentieth century. The party has left-leaning members like Raza Rabbani (1953), the current Chairman of the Senate of Pakistan, and Aitzaz Ahsan (1945), a lawyer and parliamentarian who pays lip service to workers' and common people's causes on the TV screens and in the house every now and then. These feeble voices, however, are a far cry from the leftist populism of the streets and grassroots galvanized by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Benazir. That variety of leftist Populism has passed away in Pakistan.

B. People's Party (US) 1891-1913: Rise and Putrefaction of Left-Wing Populism in the US

I. Origins

The United States witnessed a populist surge in 1890s which lived onto the first few years of the twentieth century. It was most wide spread among the farmers of the Trans-Mississippi West, the South, and the miners of the Mountain States like Colorado, Idaho and Utah. People's Party (US) was the chief expression of this populism. Economic hardships faced by farmers lay at the heart of this populist surge. Farmers of the South and the 'Hog and Corn Region' in the Prairies states faced the dilemma of having their incomes decline while agriculture expanded in the late nineteenth century US. The number of farming population in the US declined as acreage grew. In 1790, nine tenths of Americans were farm people. This number had declined to 55 percent by 1865. During the 1870s, the farm population dipped to below half of the total.²⁰ This figure contrasted with the growth in the acreage in the country where a single generation of Americans and immigrants put the plow to 431

¹⁷ Tahir Mehdi, "An Overview of 1997 General Elections: PML-N Returns with a Bang," *Dawn*, April 14, 2013.

¹⁸ Sabir Shah, "Steps against Corruption Remained Futile in Pakistan's History," *The News Islamabad*, April 20, 2016.

¹⁹ "NRO Was for Criminals and Between Benazir and Musharraf," *The News Islamabad*, December 10, 2011.

²⁰ Conlin, *The American Past*, 513.

million acres of forest and grassland, a 14.4-million-acre increase each year between 1870 and 1900.²¹

Farm incomes declined through the last three decades of the nineteenth century. After 1890 they collapsed. A crop that in 1872 earned a farmer \$ 1,000 in real income (actual purchasing power) earned only \$500 in 1896.²² A farmer 48 years of age in 1896, had to sell twice as many hogs or bushel of corns as he had produced as a young man of 24 to enjoy the same standard of living he had known in 1872.²³ Farmers increasingly ran debts they could not pay.

Declining farm incomes resulted in widespread misery and indebtedness among farmers. In the West, collapse in farm incomes caused mortgage foreclosures through which many farmers lost their lands to become tenants. In the south, tenancy was already common. Decline in farm incomes created a debilitating poverty unknown even in the prairie states – debt bondage which, according to Charles Oken in 1894, “crushed out all independence and reduced its victims to a coarse species of servile labor.”²⁴ These economically hard pressed farmers provided one source of the rise of populism in the US through the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Mining interests in the Mountain States had their own reasons for disaffection. It was caused by the demonetization of Silver, the chief mineral of the mines in these states. Since the days of early republic, the US dollar was pegged to both, gold and silver. This bimetallism was ended by the Coinage Act of 1873 which pegged the US dollar, like the European currencies, to Gold only. The market for silver produced in the Mountain States was adversely affected. Miners saw this as a measure to benefit big businesses of the North East, who traded extensively with European countries, at their expense.

This was an age of increasing incorporation and concentration of wealth in fewer hands. Railways, banks, iron and steel and, a little later, oil was controlled by big houses and corporations owned by a few people. Farmers, miners and working people in general saw the profits of the big businesses rise as their incomes declined. Their alienation and paranoia about their future lay at the heart of the origins of populism of the age.

Farmers of the South had organized the Southern Alliance and the Colored Farmers’ National Alliance as early as 1880s. In 1890 the former had 1.5 million members and the later a million.²⁵ Granges offering vibrant social life to farmers existed long before them. Farmers had lost faith in the ability of the two mainstream parties to come to their rescue. At the 1890 Ocala convention of the southern agrarians in Florida, a need for a People’s Party of the farmers at the national level was discussed. This, however, did not lead to anywhere as the racial divisions of the South stood in the way of a united party of the farmers. It was in the trans-Mississippi West that the first breakthrough was achieved. The People’s

²¹ Conlin, *The American Past*, 521.

²² Conlin, *The American Past*, 521

²³ Conlin, *The American Past*, 521.

²⁴ Quoted in Conlin, *The American Past*, 521.

²⁵ Conlin, *The American Past*, 522.

Party (US) was established on February 22, 1892 at St. Louis, Missouri.²⁶ A Populist convention met in Omaha, Nebraska in the summer of 1892 to explore the prospects for the People's Party of producer classes of the country. Delegates included farmers from the farm belt, miners from the mountain states, some union members of the Knights of Labor and a few Eastern reformers. The Omaha convention declared an ambitious platform for the People's Party (US). It offered a diverse range of programs for the working people and the multitudes in general.

II. The Platform

The People's Party is the protest of the plundered against the plunderers—of the victims against the robbers.²⁷

(Tom Watson 1892)

The platform of the PP (US) contained a vast array of manifesto items for a diverse base. Although the farmers of the wheat belt and the mining interests of the Mountain states provided its chief supporters, the party aspired to win sympathies of as many of the common people as was possible. It, therefore, offered 'a meld of the kinds of discourse that were favored by pietists and producers, Catholics as well as Protestants.'²⁸ Its Central rhetoric was anti-elitist. The chief enemy was concentrated wealth and corrupt state power. The Omaha Declaration of July, 1892 became the main doctrine of the American left-populism for the entire age. It contained these historic words in its preamble:

.... We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized; most of the States have been compelled to isolate the voters at the polling places to prevent universal intimidation and bribery. The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced, business prostrated, homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists.²⁹

The remedy to the crises, offered by the PP(US), involved a broad and, in many ways, radical range of reform agendas. It called for free and unlimited coinage of silver to beat the declining prices of the farm produce. It asked for an increase in the 'Circulating Medium'—the money supply—by \$50.³⁰ These two agenda items would, it was hoped, satisfy both, the farmers and the miners who provided key support to the Populists.

The PP(US) attempted to extend popular control over the Congress by introducing the practice of election of senators by direct vote rather than the state legislatures, and secret ballots. They also asked for other instruments of popular democracy like initiative, recall, and referendum. The Populists distrusted big banks. One element of their platform was the

²⁶ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 27.

²⁷ Quoted in Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 27.

²⁸ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 28.

²⁹ Quoted in Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 28.

³⁰ Conlin, *The American Past*, 524.

introduction of Postal Savings System wherein customers would keep saving accounts in post offices rather than in banks. They asked for nationalization of concerns of vital interest where monopolies were most easily formed i.e. railroads, telegraph and telephones. Most Populists were champions of a graduated income tax as an instrument of beating inequalities in society. Henry George (1839-1897), the author of *Progress and Poverty* (1879) recommended a tax on the value of land to beat the speculative rush on lands. He was also a great critic of the railroad monopolies.

The Populists shared the nativist prejudices of the era and called for prohibition of alien land ownership. They believed that immigrant labor was a cause of low wages and took a position against them. Most of all, the PP(US) aspired to organize a coalition of producers that would effectively challenge the might of the corporate upper class and its hand maidens to expose the evils of the class rule. They were not Marxists but they had a consciousness of the dismal plight of the lower strata of the society. It is an interesting fact that one of the most renowned articulation of the agenda of late nineteenth century American left-populism came from a leader who was not a member of the PP(US). William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925) was a three times presidential nominee of the Democratic Party of the United States. In 1896 he was backed by the PP(US) as well. He expressed the fears, hopes and aspirations of the populists of his times in his renowned *Cross of Gold Speech* which he delivered at the Democratic National Convention on July 9, 1896. Ever since, it has become one of the most celebrated speeches in the history of the United States. His words summed most of the concerns and claims of the common Americans of his age when he declared:

The man who is employed for wages is as much a businessman as his employer. The attorney in a country town is as much a businessman as the corporation counsel in a great metropolis. The merchant at the crossroads store is as much a businessman as the merchant of New York. The farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day, begins in the spring and toils all summer, and by the application of brain and muscle to the natural resources of this country creates wealth, is as much a businessman as the man who goes upon the Board of Trade and bets upon the price of grain. The miners who go 1,000 feet into the earth or climb 2,000 feet upon the cliffs and bring forth from their hiding places the precious metals to be poured in the channels of trade are as much businessmen as the few financial magnates who in a backroom corner the money of the world.³¹

III. The Base

Jesus was only possible in a barefoot world, and he was crucified by the few who wore shoes.³²

(Ignatius Donnelly)

The support base of the People's Party (US) was a mixed bag. It was a coalition of the producing elements of the society that wanted a better deal from their social and economic superiors. Farmers and miners were a key, but not exclusive, component of this coalition.

³¹ Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention Held in Chicago, Illinois, July 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11, 1896, (Logansport, Indiana, 1896), 226–234.

³² Quoted in Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 27.

Hardly anyone of the key members of the PP(US) called for the abolition of the wage system or pulling down capitalism itself. Many Catholics were ardent followers of the party. Prohibitionists extolling the virtues of temperance constituted a significant element of the party. The Populists of the era attempted to weave together a coalition of supporters across 'divisions of class, ethnicity, religious denominations and prior partisan loyalties.'³³ A who is who list of the supporters of the late nineteenth century populism in the US offers a kaleidoscopic array of support base of the PP(US). Ignatius Donnelly (1831-1901) was a Minnesotan novelist, amateur scientist, professional lecturer, Roman Catholic, a man who had, for a generation, fueled the antimonopoly cause with his eloquent if somewhat eccentric energies.³⁴ Edward Bellamy (1850-1898), the author of the renowned novel *Looking Backward:2000-1888* (1888) was a Socialist; Tom Watson (1856-1922) of Georgia was a lawyer and a journalist, he was the Vice Presidential nominee with William Jennings Bryan in 1896 elections; James B. Weaver (1833-1912) was a former union General, and Henry George, the great advocate of single Tax on land, was a Political Economist.

Alongside these men, the PP(US) had the support of groups, organizations and interest groups such as Women Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), The Prohibition Party, and Christian Socialists in seminaries and evangelical churches across the land. This disparate group built a short lived consensus over the diagnosis of the crisis the US faced and the remedies which were required to rescue it. The party lived as long as this consensus prevailed, it fragmented, crumbled and fell apart as this consensus broke down.

IV. The Decline

"The interests of rural and urban labor are the same; their enemies are identical," claimed Ignatius Donnelly.³⁵ The coalition of producers which the American Populists built at the end of nineteenth century was, however, an unstable and contradictory one. The farmers wanted prices to inflate so that their produce would sell well while the workers in cities worried about the hikes in food prices. The Socialists distrusted the trade unionists and the prohibitionists and the tax reformers had joined the PP(US) for different, if not contradictory, reasons. The Populists were not a working class party waging a class war on Marxist lines. It was a motley crowd of have-nots pitted against the haves. Keeping this kind of coalition intact for long was not possible. Even among the labor it was not easy to build strong partnerships across race lines. The immigrant waves of people from Southern and Eastern European countries and East Asia that came to the US in late nineteenth century were neither trusted nor liked by the workers from the already established groups. In the South labor remained segregated on color lines throughout the age of Jim crow attitudes and laws.

Electoral performance of the PP(US) was a limited success. In 1892 James Weaver, the presidential nominee, won over a million voters, 8.5 percent of the total.³⁶ Two Populist governors were also elected in these elections.³⁷ In 1894, Populist candidates won over 1.5 million votes; seven nominees for the House and six for the Senate won elections. Several

³³ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*,28.

³⁴ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*,28.

³⁵ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*,29.

³⁶ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*,42.

³⁷ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*,42.

hundred others won elections to the state legislatures. These victories, however, were confined to the deep South and the trans-Mississippi West only. A large section in the party started shifting to the center after 1894, downplaying the more radical elements in the Omaha Platform.³⁸

The decision to fuse the PP(US) with the Democratic Party in the 1896 presidential election and back William Jennings Bryan was also a shift to the center of the political spectrum. It involved compromising the Omaha Platform as Bryan and Democrats did not accept all of it. The suggestion to fuse parties for the 1896 election was debated intensely before the fusionists carried the day. It proved to be a mistake. Bryan could only carry the South, the hard pressed Western farm states and the Rocky Mountain mining states, each of which had only three electoral votes. The gamble of compromising their own platform for the prospect of successfully sending an ally to the White House had failed. The Populists did not have much left to live on politically after the defeat of William Jennings Bryan. Farm prices rose in the farm belt through the turn of the century. Poor European harvests at the end of the nineteenth century also gave a boost to the prices of American grains. Gold discoveries in Canada, Alaska, South Africa and southern Nevada inflated the dollar naturally. The need for silver minting was not there anymore. The two issues that had so vehemently induced passions for the Populist cause among the farmers and the mining interests had become irrelevant. The PP(US) lingered on till the end of the first decade of the twentieth century after which it passed away unnoticed.

Conclusion

Anxieties and fears of working people in the times of monopoly capitalism and concentration of wealth in fewer hands spawned populist forces in both countries, Pakistan and the US. Two leftist People's parties became the chief vehicles for expressing this populist sentiment in the two countries. These Parties, however were not purely working class parties waging struggles on class lines. Their respective bases were diverse, and at times, contained contradictory interests such as the farmers and urban workers in the PP(US) and petit bourgeoisie and labor interests of the Pakistan People's Party.

While the Populists of the two people parties invoked the language of revolution and Working people's rights in their formative years, the diverse character of their respective bases meant that they shifted to the center over time. Such shifts to the center are often interpreted as betrayal by the class warriors and working people in the party fold. This kind of disaffection was felt by labor in both People's Parties. Political parties cannot afford to alienate their base. When they do that, they pay a political price for it. Pakistan People's Party suffered electorally for not offering a good labor policy for the country after their first government. Most of its working class base has been unhappy with the gradual occupation of the party by people of questionable repute and capabilities. When the PP(US) fused with the Democratic Party in order to parachute an ally to the White House, it signed its death warrant. When William Jennings Bryan, the candidate supported by PP(US), lost 1896 elections, the party lost much credibility with its base and started declining. When Samuel

³⁸ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 43.

Gompers (1850-1924), the veteran labor leader of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), was asked to ensure the AFL's support for Populism, he replied, "These Middle Class issues simply divert attention from their own interests."³⁹ In populist parties such as the Pakistan People's Party and the People's Party (US), Middle Class issues often took a center stage at the expense of the interests of the labor. This trend led to their eventual undoing as most of their bases often consisted of the working people.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Government and Non-Governmental Organizations Documents

Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention Held in Chicago, Illinois, July 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11, 1896, (Logansport, Indiana, 1896), 226–234.

Secondary Sources

Books

- Ahmed, Khursheed. *Labour Movement in Pakistan: Past and Present*. Lahore: Institute of Workers Education and Labour Studies, 2009.
- Conlin, Joseph R. *The American Past: A Survey of American History*. Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2010.
- Dubofsky, Melvyn and Foster Rhea Dulles. *Labor in America: A History*. Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 2010.
- Jones, Philip E. *The People's Party Rise to Power*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Kazin, Michael. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998.

Journals and Magazines

- Sulehria, Farooq "The Left in Pakistan: A Brief History," *Links: International Journal of Socialist Revival*, August 8, 2009, <http://links.org.au/node/170> .
- Sumbul, Deneb "Labour Movement in Pakistan: Interview with Karamat Ali, Executive Director of the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research," *Alternatives International*, June 1, 2017, <http://www.alterinter.org/spip.php?article4591> .

³⁹ Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America: A History* (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 2010), 163.